

Martin Luther King Day Speech 2013

By Mayor Mike Winder

I welcome you to West Valley City's first multidenominational Martin Luther King Day service. This is a historic gathering on a historic day.

I appreciate Rev. Vinnetta Golphin-Wilkerson of the Granger Christian Church, the Rev. Pablo Ramos and the Rev. Isabel Gonzalez of San Esteban Episcopal Church, the Rev. Jeff Loudon of St. Matthew's Lutheran Church, and the Rev. Matt Seddon of St. Stephen's Episcopal Church for convening this marvelous gathering for us to reflect and worship together.

It is a day to reflect on how far we have come in the cause of equality, where we still fall short, and to worship the God whose sons and daughters we all are.

America has come far since 1863, since 1963, and today in 2013 there is much that we can be proud of and appreciative of. Our city has proved that leaders regardless of race, of age, of gender can be elected to the City Council. Our planning commission and other city committees are filled with diverse civic leaders and volunteers. Our city council has affirmed that no one is to be denied housing or employment based on sexual orientation or gender identity. We honored Rosa Parks with a street named after her last year, which appropriately leads up to our Cultural Celebration Center. We have come far.

To get a real pulse on where we stand in West Valley City today when it comes to living Dr. King's dream of equality, I look to our schools. Karyn and I are the parents of four children, and our youngest son John is a third grader at Farnsworth Elementary. Last year, I surprised Johnny on his birthday by showing up to school and eating lunch with him. There at his lunch table were his friends and classmates—kids whose parents and ancestors were from countries far and wide. The children of recent immigrants from Eastern

Europe, Latin America and Africa laughed and ate with children whose families had been in this country since the days of pioneers and pilgrims.

At lunch recess (my favorite part), this melting pot melted into a vigorous game of soccer—a national pastime popular the world over. They were truly colorblind as they battled for a goal on that cold winter day.

Last week I was helping John with his homework and we read a story from his reading text book together. It was the story of Madam C.J. Walker, America's first female self-made millionaire, whose story is even more remarkable considering she was the first child in her family born into freedom after the Emancipation Proclamation was signed.

After we finished I asked John what he thought of C.J. Walker. He said he wanted to be successful in business like her too, and asked if he could open a lemonade stand this summer. It struck me that when many of us adults look at the story of Madam C.J. Walker we see a remarkable black woman, who defied the odds of someone of her race and gender born in the American South in 1867. But when Johnny learned the story of C.J. Walker he viewed her not as a black woman, but as a successful business person, as a prosperous *individual*.

After seeing his innocent, childlike, colorblind perspective, I just had to ask him, "John, at school do kids ever judge each other by their skin color? Does anyone get teased or put down because of their skin color?" He smiled big, being the smart third-grader that he is, and said "No Dad. We just tease each other based on our character."

His choice of words, surely influenced by classroom discussions of Dr. King and his work, made me smile. "I have a dream," said the great American preacher whose cause of equality we celebrate today, "that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character."

We are surely not there yet, but spending time with a third grader in 21st century West Valley City gives me hope that we are not too far off from that day, either.

When we prejudge people, based on their race, their gender, their disabilities, their height, their hair color, or any other outward appearance, we sell them short, and we sell ourselves short of truly realizing the beautiful people that are all around us. Our community can be so much stronger if we look at our neighbors and see their potential, not dismiss them based on ugly prejudices.

My young family enjoys meeting up with Karyn's parents on Saturdays for a quick fast food lunch. A fun lunch with their grandparents gives our kids good incentive to get their Saturday chores done! One of our frequent spots to hit is the Wendy's on 5400 South. One time there we were impressed with a physically and mentally handicapped young employee who was helping to clear tables. Occasionally, the boy would have a supervisor there with a clipboard to observe and coach, clearly part of his special training program.

My father-in-law was great to reach out to the handicapped employee, finding simple tasks that he could help us with, whether refilling a drink or getting an extra BBQ sauce. We learned his name—Brandon—and in subsequent visits he learned all of ours. To fit eight of us together always required putting some tables together, and my father-in-law would even tip Brandon a little to help put them back at the end of our meal. Our kids developed a respect and appreciation for this good worker, and when asked where they wanted to go to lunch on Saturday's, they would usually reply "Brandon's Wendy's!"

Imagine, going to a Wendy's where every member of your family is greeted by name, and where the service is beyond anything you'd ever find in fast food. I was so impressed, I even mentioned our experience with Brandon when talking to the CEO of Wendy's, Emil Brolick, when he dropped by Utah last year to check out some new store designs.

Brandon eventually disappeared from our usual Wendy's, and we learned he had been transferred to a different location. We found him one day working the Wendy's on 3500 South, so now our family has a new "Brandon's Wendy's." On the first lunch that we found him, he was so excited to see us, and us him. We overheard him whisper excitedly to his supervisor with the clipboard, "They followed me! They followed me!"

So in the spirit of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., let us resolve today to do better to not prejudge anyone. Let us make sure that here in West Valley City, here in the state of Utah, the welcome table is spread out for all. Let us remember that all humankind is created equal, and that the inhabitants of this blessed land are entitled by their Creator to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Let us recognize that it is our character which ultimately defines us. This is liberating to all of us, and allows freedom to truly ring.

In the words of Dr. King, “when we allow freedom to ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, [even West Valley City], we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, ‘Free at last! free at last! thank God Almighty, we are free at last!’”

God bless our community as we strive for this freedom.